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## The Junkyard Angel

OC OC

The first time I met Adam, he didn't seem that remarkable. Just another cadet in a gray Federation uniform, waiting quietly in front of my store while his Bhul'ee Sergeant extorted me.

Then again, most humans left the same impression on me, given their lack of an exoskeleton or clawed limbs, so maybe that was just my ignorance rearing its ugly head. His skin seemed too soft-looking to take seriously. I couldn't help but underestimate him at the time. Either way, the young man only came to my attention when his superior ordered him to inspect the hangar in the back of my store.

I instantly feared for my well-being. They caught me at the worst possible moment. My secret project at the time was a spaceship that could leave orbit and re-enter the atmosphere on its own, built meticulously over the years with cutting-edge parts I had acquired through great effort. Some of them were unregistered due to the means I used to buy them. It didn't have any weapons installed, nor did I intend to change that, but its engine could use a warp core which was more than enough to arouse suspicion.

Adam marched inside with a disciplined gait, the stride of someone who took their job seriously. His hardened expression, with eyes hidden by his helmet's silver visor, sent a shiver down my carapace as he walked past me.

An eternity passed while he scanned my workshop. Or at least, it *felt* that way. The hangar wasn't that big, housing only a dozen disassembled mech suits and empty ship hulls. A long examination meant the cadet was carefully going through everything.

In my head, I went over as many excuses and explanations as I could, but none felt good enough to satisfy my tormentor. The Bhul'ee, Sergeant Yoruk, was looking for any excuse to charge more for his 'protection' and illegal parts would fit perfectly into that plan, if he didn't outright arrest me.

Technically speaking, I wasn't in too much trouble since I hadn't assembled the ship yet. Many of the components for the navigation computer were out in the open, though, since I was working on it when they interrupted me. Anyone that stopped for a moment and glanced around the workbench could easily discern what I was doing. Adam would definitely find out my plan if he carried out his task with even a modicum of thoroughness. His visor's scanner should detect the components' origins.

By the time the cadet emerged from the workshop, I had already accepted my fate. The human stared directly at me, hinting for a second what I feared, then turned to his Sergeant and said:

"It's all clear, sir."

I almost fainted.

"Is that so?" said Sergeant Yoruk, studying me with his three eyes.

I swallowed, keeping my mandible shut.

Adam nodded. "We must've gotten a bad tip." He turned to me. "Sorry for wasting your time."

Sergeant Yoruk made a crooked smile. "Then it appears we have business elsewhere, cadet."

Those open-ended statements of his never finished well for anyone. Sergeant Yoruk took delight in toying with his prey. If this was all a ruse to catch me off guard, it worked well. If not, then whoever ratted me out was about to pay dearly for wasting the Sergeant's time. His grim laugh as he cracked his four knuckles and left my store made that very clear.

I ran into the hangar as fast as I could, terrified they might return at any moment, and scrambled to hide the components.

None of them were missing. I expected Adam had stolen something but everything was in its place. That didn't leave me any less stressed, though. It probably meant the young cadet would come back at some point to lord it over me.

The next day, I heard Gleeb, one of my competitors, had been savagely beaten into a coma by Yoruk and his squadron. I almost felt sorry for him. We were the two biggest suppliers of mech-suit components in this part of the city, but that wasn't good enough for him, so he felt the need to get me in trouble. Little did he know that his failed ploy allowed my business to prosper, since he never recovered from the beating. Some would call that a blessing. Unfortunately, it only brought more scrutiny upon me, since Yoruk figured I had more money to lose from then on.

Adam returned to my shop at the end of the month with orders to collect Yoruk's newly increased protection fee. His demeanor was stiff and distant, like usual, but to my surprise, the human didn't blackmail me over the unregistered parts or charge me more than he should for his trouble. While I transferred the credits, I even wondered if he hadn't noticed my project until hearing him casually ask:

"So uh... why are you building a class-two ship?"

I blinked, stunned.

"It's alright. I'm not telling anyone. Just curious."

"I... I don't know what you're talking about."

"Right," Adam glanced away. "Sorry."

I finished the transaction as quickly as I could. Adam left without saying anything else, and I couldn't be more grateful for that. Why would I tell him anything? I'd have to be an idiot to share a single thing about it.

Over the next few months, Adam would be the one who picked up my protection money. He always had a slight frown, almost glaring though not quite, but treated me with a kind sense of professionalism that put me at ease whenever we interacted. I never had to fear for my safety around him, unlike the rest of his comrades. He never even brought up my ship again.

Unfortunately, my business suffered a lot as interplanetary trades in our sector had slowed to a crawl. In an unusual burst of activity, a mysterious entity known as the Pirate King had plundered several shipments heading our way, breaking our supply chain. The planet wouldn't receive any new mech-suits for at least a year, which left me as one of the few sources of spare components on Junkyard Prime.

Sergeant Yoruk was ordered to 'negotiate' with me on behalf of the Federation's Battle School. They needed more parts for their training mechs, and they wanted them cheap.

I refused at first, thinking I had more leverage. The price they demanded was simply too low. Sergeant Yoruk quickly gave up on diplomacy, though. He grabbed me by the shell and dragged me out of my store, throwing me face-first into a wall at the back end of an alley, with his entire squadron blocking the only exit.

I curled up in a ball, quivering.

Sergeant Yoruk towered over me. "Do we have a deal or not?"

"You're asking me to starve!" I pleaded.

"Bullshit! I know you're making more than ever!"

"You've taken it all! What more do you want?!?"

Sergeant Yoruk paused for a second, then snarled.

I shrunk back, only to hear the Bhul'ee say:

"Cadet, take care of him."

"Me?" asked Adam, suddenly nervous.

"Yes," said Yoruk. "You never take part in our beatings. I'd like to see you rough him up a little."

"I uh..." Adam pursed his lips, straightening his back. "I'd rather not, sir."

Yoruk narrowed his eyes.

Adam stayed calm.

Yoruk slowly walked over to him and wrapped two arms over the human's shoulders, tender with care. "Now, Cadet, you know I like you. It's why I trust you over everyone else in this squadron. You never take bribes, you don't use excessive force, and you always finish your paperwork on time. All in all, you've never given me a reason to doubt you. But that's the thing. You're too... good. We can't rely on you if you can't dirty yourself a little."

Adam pursed his lips, unwilling to speak, then said:

"I'm still not doing it."

Yoruk tensed his grip around Adam, frowning. "This isn't up for debate, understood?"

Adam sighed. "Alright. If it has to be this way..."

"Good!" Yoruk smiled, patting him on the back. "Go on, then!"

Adam took a step forward, reluctant.

I started whimpering. At my age, I wouldn't be able to regrow any cracks he left on my shell.

Adam pulled out his baton.

Yoruk widened his mouth into a sadistic grin.

Adam proceeded to bash Yoruk in the face with all his strength.

I couldn't believe my eyes. The rest of the squadron reacted the same way, shocked by the human's sudden betrayal. Adam had knocked the Bhul'ee on his rear and struck him several more times with the baton to keep him down, breaking the sergeant's nose in the process. When the other officers finally interfered, the human started fighting them as well, taking out two of them while Yoruk moaned on the ground.

The remaining cadets had to respect his strength despite outnumbering him. Nobody wanted to be the one getting hit. They circled around Adam, hesitant to engage, but Sergeant Yoruk rose to his feet in the meantime, catching the human off-guard with a sneak attack. The sucker punch left Adam an easy target for the rest to gang up on, who then proceeded to take turns smacking him with their own batons and stomping on him when he collapsed.

I hadn't seen something so gruesome in all my life. When I tried to leave, Sergeant Yoruk stopped attacking Adam and forced me to keep watching, laughing as I flinched away from the violence.

Adam ended up a broken mess of swollen bruises, torn flesh, and exposed bone, gargling in a puddle of his own blood. His eyes had glazed over halfway through the battering, unreactive to everything around him. I couldn't begin to imagine the pain he was in.

"Is the message clear?" said Sergeant Yoruk. "The Academy isn't messing around. We will get our components one way or the other. Play nice and you won't end up like him."

"Okay," I muttered, horrified. "You win."

Sergeant Yoruk and his squadron exited the alley paying no mind to Adam's twitching body. He was on the verge of death.

I wanted to leave. Helping him wouldn't benefit me at all. His vacant eyes forced me to stay, though. He had just refused to attack me and suffered the consequences for it. At the very least, I owed him my aid.

Thanks to a clandestine doctor I knew, Adam spent the next day in a rejuvenation tank, healing from his wounds. It cost me a lot of credits but I tried not to care about it. I was going to be broke soon anyway.

After leaving the underground health clinic, we headed to a small empty bar where we had our first real conversation. I bought a bottle of cheap liquor, which humans could thankfully drink as well, and sat at the table farthest into the room, where not even the bartender could hear us.

There, we had a few drinks in silence. Under dim orbs that emulated candle light, I noticed Adam had softened his normally stoic demeanor. He didn't have a rigid posture anymore and, without his helmet, his face seemed a lot less fierce. Just a pair of tired eyes that were lost in thought. It left me comfortable enough to ask:

"Why did you help me?"

Adam snapped out of his daze with a weak smile. "I should ask you the same."

"You've done it twice, though. I was only paying you back."

Adam remained quiet for a moment, embarrassed. "I figured you had some important reason for building the ship. It didn't feel right to take it away."

I chuckled. "That's the sad part. I'm far too old to pilot it well, and everyone I've ever cared about is either dead or off-planet. All I have is my store now, and my tinkering hobby. In the end... I just wanted to see if I could build something great."

Adam furrowed his brow a bit, leaning forward. "Why?"

I took a moment to think about my answer, swishing around the liquor in my cup. "I... don't... know. It isn't something I actively gave any thought. Part of it is arrogance. Modern ship designs have stagnated these past two centuries and I feel... no, I *know* I can do better."

"And the other part?"

I looked away. Under normal circumstances, I would never confess this, but the alcohol had already taken its toll on my judgment. "It's embarrassing. The idea of sailing the stars on my own ship has been a nice daydream throughout the years. Every time I acquired a new part, or worked on the design, I could almost forget about my dreary life. It was never a realistic option, though, and part of me always knew it." I gulped down the rest of my drink. It burned my throat but it didn't numb my self-loathing as much as I wanted. "So no, there wasn't an important reason behind it. You shouldn't have sacrificed yourself for a fool like me."

Adam's eyes glistened with the dim light, his gaze full of sudden conviction. "Sounds important enough to me."

I squinted. "Really?"

"Yeah, thanks for sharing. I don't regret my decision one bit."

"That's... unexpected, but it does ease my guilt. Thank you."

Adam shrugged. "We all have our dreams. It's only natural to protect them."

"What about you?"

Adam hung his head, slightly wounded by the question.

"My bad, ignore me."

"No, no, it's only fair. Mine's just... dumb."

"More than mine?"

Adam chortled. "By far."

I poured more liquor into both our cups. "Go ahead, I won't judge."

Adam raised the cup in gratitude, took a long swig, and said:

"I want- Well, *wanted* to be a mech pilot, but I guess that's not an option anymore."

"Ahh, I see."

The mech battle school was the most prestigious section of the Federation's Military Academy. Billions of cadets throughout the galaxy applied every year and failed to get in. Only the ninety-ninth percentile of applicants were accepted, since the skills required to both pilot and maintain their mech suits were incredibly difficult to learn.

Most people chalked it up to talent and never bothered trying, settling for easier specializations. Species with multiple limbs or psionic abilities had an overwhelming advantage, but even that didn't guarantee success. The competition was just too fierce. Once someone graduated and finished serving a few years in the Federation fleet, their piloting license secured them high-paying work for the rest of their lives, whether as wandering mercenaries, bounty hunters, or as part of a planetary defense force.

A facility like the battle school could only be made on an already polluted planet like Junkyard Prime, since their real-life simulations would leave training fields scorched and slightly irradiated. It explained why Adam was so far from his home planet.

"So what happened? Did you fail the exam?"

Adam stared into his half-empty cup, wistful. "I actually passed."

I widened my eyes.

Adam made a wry smirk. "No need to look that surprised."

"Sorry; that's amazing! Are you the first human to accomplish this?"

"Yeah..."

"Then what are you going to do? It's not like they've kicked you out, right?"

"It isn't that simple. Yoruk is very influential among the academy's upper echelon. He actually hand-picked me for his squadron, like he does with many top students, because it lets him blackmail future high-ranking officers into doing favors for him, even after they get their license." Adam sighed. "I might as well be expelled. There's no way I'm graduating."

"I can't help but feel responsible for this."

"You aren't. I focused so much on my goal that I abandoned everything else in my life, and didn't realize the cost until it was too late. It's all my fault. If I had dedicated myself to cultivating relationships, like Yoruk, maybe I wouldn't be stuck in this mess. And now..." Adam finished his drink. "Well, it doesn't matter." He smiled. "At least I made a friend."

I tilted my head, confused. For some reason, my neural implant didn't translate the final part. "What was that last word?"

"Friend."

"Must be a human thing. The translator can't give me an equivalent term."

"Huh, that's strange." Adam scratched his head, thinking. "It's sort of like a synonym to companion but it implies... a deeper connection that goes beyond biology, hierarchy, or the circumstances that brought you together. *Your* success is *their* success, as are your failures. You see yourself reflected in their motives and struggles, so you do your best to help each other out. Most important of all, though, you stay loyal to them no matter what."

"That sounds nice. Do all humans share this bond?"

Adam stifled a laugh. "No, no, far from it. We've been killing each other since the dawn of time. Good friends are, by definition, hard to find. The reason they're so valuable is because of their rarity."

That struck a chord in me. Throughout my life, the galaxy had felt like such a cold, uncaring place that the thought of people being there for each other, without an ulterior motive, made me long for a universe where this was commonplace. I still didn't know how to pronounce the term, but I knew it was something worthwhile.

Adam didn't have a place to stay, considering Yoruk thought he was dead, so I decided to host him under my roof from that day onwards. His help was incredibly valuable. I'd forgotten how good it felt to have company. Adam could do all the heavy lifting that usually gave me back pain but, more than that, I just enjoyed having someone around.

My food replicator wasn't the best, often overheating when I used it for more than one portion, but it still turned out a decent meal when it worked. In the evenings, after closing the store, we would head to the bar and get as drunk as we could afford. The young human was a competent mech-technician so we could go for hours discussing our work. When we could barely stand, the

relatively sober one would help the other stumble back home. We traded these roles back and forth. Looking back, I can safely say those days carry some of the fondest memories of my life.

This period of tranquility didn't last long, though.

Sergeant Yoruk showed up to my store a few weeks later, ready to seize over half my inventory. He even paid me a lesser sum of money than we had agreed on. When I realized this, the Bhul'ee gave me a threatening glare, daring me to speak up.

I merely lowered my head.

It wasn't in my best interest to argue. Adam had hidden himself inside the cockpit of a disassembled mech, an old RX-22 assault model. If we weren't careful, Yoruk would find him. I needed the sergeant out of the store as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, Yoruk had other plans. While members of his squadron carried off components, the sergeant noticed a path among the cluttered bolts and wires that led to Adam's hiding spot.

I tried to hide my nervousness, but Yoruk must have noticed this, asking:

"You working on this?"

"N-not really."

"What a shame." Yoruk walked up to the cockpit, inspecting it with a discerning glance. "They really don't make 'em like this anymore. You can't match that vintage chassis."

I nodded along.

"Mind if I take it off your hands?"

I felt my insides churn. "Oh no, I'm not done with it."

Yoruk deepened his stare. "I thought you weren't working on it."

"Well, not right now, since I'm busy, but-"

Yoruk rested his heavy hand on my shoulder, lowering his voice. "You're not hiding anything in it, are you? Like, more components?"

I shook my head. "No, never."

"Good, 'cause I'm taking it."

I didn't know what to do. Yoruk was already ordering his underlings to haul it away. Anything I said would just dig me a deeper hole. There wasn't another option. Adam would understand, right?

No. He'd be rightfully disappointed in me. The man already threw away his dream to save me. If our bond was genuine, I needed to prove I could do the same.

"Wait!"

Yoruk paused, curious.

"Don't take it, please."

"Why?"

"Because..." I stopped myself from lying, fearing he would notice it. "No, my motive doesn't matter. It simply has sentimental value. How many credits will it take to leave it alone?"

Yoruk lit up at the mention of payment. "Oh, I don't know, it would have to be pretty big, considering how much I like it."

"Double," I said. "Double my protection fee. Just let me keep it."

"Can you even afford that?"

"N-not right now, but if you give me a month-"

Yoruk smiled. "Pleasure doing business with you."

I don't even know why I let myself do that. The only thing it accomplished was delaying the inevitable. I couldn't afford that amount in a normal month. With half my inventory gone, the goal was impossible.

Adam got out of the cockpit when the squadron was finally gone. His saddened face made it clear he heard the deal. "Did you have to do that?"

"It's the only thing I could think of at the time."

"What are you going to do?"

"Give up? Go into hiding?" I sighed. "No. It's not like I can hide anywhere on Junkyard Prime."

Adam widened his eyes with an epiphany. "What about your ship?"

"What of it?"

"We could use it to escape this star system!"

I shook my head. "That's not happening. Even if we assemble it before the deadline, we'd still need a warp core for that to be feasible, and those aren't exactly easy to find in the best of times. The supply chain issues have made them non-existent here."

"What if I could find one?"

"Come on Adam, be realistic."

"I'm not kidding. There's a way to do it. And, really, what other option do we have?"

I couldn't argue with that logic. Even if we didn't find a warp core, I'd rather die with my dream project finished than wallow in despair for the rest of my days. That realization quashed my doubts. We went to work as fast as we could.

The ship wasn't exactly a conventional design so it required long hours on our part to get it right. I wouldn't accept anything short of perfection. One mistake would kill us before we left the atmosphere. All the while, Adam made preparations to acquire the warp core. He didn't share the details with me, trying not to worry me, but I could tell he was up to something dangerous.

We finished building the ship two days before Yoruk's deadline. It was beautiful. A sleek chrome hull with heat resistant plating and wings that allowed it to fly both inside an atmosphere and outside in the vacuum of space. It had enough space in the back for cargo and a mighty engine that could let it outspeed most Federation starfighters.

Adam hadn't gotten his hands on the warp core yet, but he assured me he would get it done the next day. At that point, I didn't even care how he acquired one. I just wanted to survive. We left for the bar one last time and shared a final bottle before our desperate escape, although it didn't help me catch much sleep that night. The anxiety was just too much to ignore.

I only got a few hours of sleep, waking up to the sound of blaring alarms.

A state of emergency had just been declared. Apparently, a rogue Federation cadet had sneaked into the military base and stolen a weapon of mass destruction. I didn't need to pry further to know what happened.

Adam got the warp core from them. That had been his plan all along. The human didn't have to explain anything when he ran into my store. He carried in his arms a metallic canister with a dark mass floating inside its crystal cylinder.

"What the hell did you do?" I asked, baffled.

"I uh... I kinda fucked up. My plan was to leave before they noticed, and I almost did, but I triggered a new security measure before escaping."

"Great."

Adam offered me the canister. "We still got a warp core!"

"It doesn't matter. The entire planet is on high alert. They'll shoot us out of the sky the moment they notice us."

"I have another idea."

I frowned.

"Come on, hear me out!"

"These plans of yours have proven to be suspect."

"We don't have much time. If you don't trust me, you might as well turn me in."

I felt tempted for a second, but I couldn't do that to him. "Fine. What do you have in mind?"

Adam went on to quickly explain his plan. I had a hard time buying into it but, the more he elaborated, the more I realized it was our only option. That didn't make it any less painful.

I welled up with tears as I watched my ship fly away without me. It would be the last time I ever saw it up close. Adam was piloting it alone. He seemed confident in his scheme. I had to go outside to follow the action with my binoculars.

The ship was spotted only a few minutes after it lifted off.

No less than fifty security drones gave chase. Due to its warp core, they couldn't pursue it once it left the planet so they needed to shoot it down before that happened.

Eventually, they slowly encircled the ship, and I thought nothing more could be done.

That was when I witnessed Adam's true talent. He maneuvered the ship so well that it tricked the drones into crashing against one another, narrowly dodging their energy beams in the process. The Federation had no choice but to send actual fighter pilots after him.

Adam handled them perfectly. He flew in a way that gave the appearance of being heavily armed, despite the ship not having any weapons. The Federation pilots didn't engage directly since they weren't aware of this, giving Adam more space to operate. At this rate, the ship would easily leave the planet.

I'm proud to say that they couldn't catch up. A combination of its non-standard design, along with its skillful pilot, made it a nightmare to predict.

The Federation set up a blockade just outside of orbit. It looked like an impenetrable wall of steel looming over the city. Thousands of drones and starfighters blotted out the sky in an effort to stop the ship. Adam then opened a public transmission and said:

"Move the blockade or I'll activate the warp core!"

The Federation didn't take that threat lightly. If a warp core was activated while inside a planet's electromagnetic field, it could fry every single electronic device in that part of the hemisphere. The pilot wasn't guaranteed to survive, though. It was all a gamble that very few people would take.

The fighter pilots engaged the ship, now with orders to destroy it at all costs. They saw through Adam's subterfuge. The ship couldn't do anything to them without weapons. As they gained on him, Adam made one final announcement:

"Thank you, Sergeant Yoruk. This is for you!"

The blockade unleashed dozens of energy beams, exploding the ship in a great ball of purple light.

Watching my dream burn up in the sky was hard. Part of me died with it. Thankfully, Adam was there to console me. He had been piloting the ship remotely the entire time. Since he had used Yoruk's access codes to steal the warp core, and had just credited him for this stunt, the sergeant was now implicated in the most infamous terrorist act in the history of Junkyard Prime.

It didn't take long for him to be incarcerated. Nobody could protect him due to the severity of the crime. The following investigation revealed all his racketeering and blackmailing, along with the fact that he had lied about Adam's supposed disappearance. His underlings quickly confessed everything in order to avoid jail time. It all looked as if Yoruk had tasked the human with stealing the warp core for him, which we now had in our possession. The Federation assumed it had been destroyed in the explosion, but Adam never actually installed it. The whole thing had been a giant bluff.

With Yoruk gone, my livelihood wasn't under threat anymore. I could finally build my ship in peace. That wasn't my next project, though. Adam helped me with my dream, and now I had something else in mind to repay his kindness. Since his goal was to be a pilot, I decided to build him the ultimate mech suit, my magnum opus: The Junkyard Angel.

It was the first mech suit in the galaxy to operate with a warp core engine. I used everything I learned from my original design to create a mech capable of interstellar travel, even repurposing the scrap metal of my ship to fashion its wings. From then on, Adam traveled the galaxy as a rogue mech pilot, fighting the Federation's corruption wherever he went. The Junkyard Angel was such a powerful machine that Adam could fight an entire battalion on his own and win.

Every now and then, Adam visited me in secret to see how I was doing. I'd show him my new ship designs, chastise him for damaging his mech, and drink with him until late in the night, like we did back then. Unfortunately, the years weigh heavily on me, and I fear I won't live to meet him again.

I write this final journal entry as my way to immortalize his deeds. It'd be a shame if nobody knew of his crusade. I don't know who will read this. If you've stumbled upon my journal by accident, or while rummaging through my belongings, it means I'm already gone, but since you've gotten this far, allow this old tinkerer to impart one last morsel of wisdom:

Humans are not your enemy. They are worth your time.

They may not stand out on the surface, and even do things that baffle conventional logic, but in my centuries of life I've never encountered someone who was as loyal, daring, and kind as Adam. Their concept of mutual trust is unique in this cut-throat galaxy, and deserves to be known by all. Perhaps Adam was an outlier, and the rest of his species would fall short in comparison, but I suspect the ideals he lived by weren't as rare as he claimed.

Adam, if by some stroke of good luck this journal has reached you, I only want you to know one thing:

Thank you for being my friend.

P.S. I finally learned how to say it!